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Brother Sims's mistake,

Harry Stillwell Edwards



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BROTHER SIMS'S
MISTAKE

BROTHER SIMS'S MISTAKE

By

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"TWO RUNAWAYS," "HIS DEFENSE"

"ENEAS AFRICANUS," ETC.



PUBLISHED BY
THE J. W. BURKE COMPANY
MACON, GEORGIA

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Brother Sims's Mistake

THE Rev. Joshua Sims reached the Holly Bluff settlement Saturday afternoon, near the close of summer, with but little time to spare, and no disposition to preach a sermon. He was due at Smyrna upon the following morning, where he was under contract to join four couples in the bonds of wedlock, and at the annual picnic near Smyrna, many miles farther, on Monday. Four fees were involved in the matrimonial affair, and Brother Sims yielded to no man in his respect for a fee, be it possum, pork, or pocket-money. But the Smyrna picnic was the chief social function in church circles, and the glory of that picnic was its barbecued shotes; for be it known that, while the legal title was sometimes doubtful, there was ever about shotes—annually contributed for picnic day—a flavor distinctive and delightful, born of the free



range of swamps that abound in mass and the cool, sweet muscadine. Death might perhaps have kept Brother Sims's physical outfit from arriving upon the picnic-grounds in time for dinner, but it is suspected that even death would not have deterred his astral body, if it is indeed true that when men die the initial velocity acquired in life is still potent. It would, in all likelihood, have arrived promptly, and have made a meal of the astral shotes.

Time had laid only gentle hands on the great itinerant since he preached his famous sermon and embalmed himself in the memory of admiring Americans. He was a little thicker through waist and neck, and the blackness of him had gained from the fatness of life a braver luster. These were the only changes. His roving eyes still flashed their keen, comprehensive glances; his flow of words and ideas was still as marvelous, his wit and satire as brilliant, his invective as terrific.

The indisposition of Brother Sims in con-

nection with the expected sermon arose from what might be called his state of unpreparedness; for the habits of Brother Sims were the chains of his genius. He was not a preacher of discourses; he was no defender of the faith. He was mighty, but in the charge only; and the devil, to him, was always a personal one. If anybody could withstand Brother Sims's charge, he might defeat him; but few, even with the backing of the arch-enemy himself, would attempt such a thing. To preach successfully and effectively, it was absolutely necessary for Brother Sims to arrive on the grounds at least twelve hours in advance of his appointment; and twelve were always sufficient, for within the limit he would move around industriously, and from the zealous and jealous gather enough of the misdeeds of his flock to enable him to locate the common enemy and fire effective volleys. His skill in this preparation was nothing less than phenomenal, his execution something more than frightful. Upon this occasion, preparation being impossible, a substitute must be found;



and Brother Sims announced an "experience meeting."

And the summons went forth. By their mysterious channels of communication, it was known within a few hours to all negroes interested that Holly Bluff would hold an experience meeting.

Darkness descended. To the humble log church, spacious, but dwarfed by the great pines that sheltered it—pines erect like the pipes of a mighty organ, and murmuring sweetly their far, faint melodies, hushed hymns of long ago—came the scattered flock. There were nervous little black Tom, guarded vigilantly by his gigantic consort Tempy, the one with a fat lightwood torch, the other with a fat umbrella; Henry Clay Thompson, bent and sad since emancipation forced him to think; black Aleck, with the fisherman's heraldry upon his Sunday garments; Ben Evans, with his wife Melviny; and Sal, whose "comin' through," some years previous, left scars upon the whole congregation. Besides these there were a hundred others, grave, silent, appre-

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hensive. For no one knew the workings of the great man's mind. They only remembered where their own bars were down, and past results.

And there was present the presiding elder, Uncle Lazarus. The eye of the preacher rested upon him the moment he entered. It followed him to the corner from which the "Yes, Lord!" "Do so, Lord!" "Oom hoo!" "Face the light!" and "Amen!" were expected to roll promptly. And soon the keen observer noticed that, however often the attention of that eye was won by newcomers, it always returned to Uncle Lazarus; and soon a whisper went around which focused all other eyes upon the same unfortunate deputy shepherd. It was understood that the Evil One was present in Uncle Lazarus, and was to be assaulted.

Ten minutes before the opening hour, the preacher lifted his head suddenly and asked in a cheerful voice:

"Brother Lazarus, how many members does yer claim for Holly Bluff?"

Brother Lazarus reflected a full minute—



not to recall the statistics, but to avoid any trap that might be laid for him; for let it not be supposed that Lazarus had failed to observe what had become revealed to all others. He knew Joshua Sims as well as any man living.

"One hunderd an' forty-fo'," he said at length.

"Yes," said Brother Sims, encouragingly stroking his fat chin as he half reclined in his chair; and then: "How many did yer have las' year, Brother Lazarus?" The voice was now musical and conciliating. It was almost a little voluntary upon brotherly love.

"One hunderd an' forty-eight."

"Yes," said Brother Sims; and then it was plain to everybody that some problem had presented itself; for his face gradually lost its placidity, and a wave of trouble rolled across it. "Did yer say *one forty-eight*, Brother Lazarus?" he asked, at length. "Does yer mean ter say fo' of my sheep done strayed?"



"Dead!" said Brother Lazarus, almost cheerfully. "Thar was—"

"Ain't thar nobody hyah, Brother Lazarus, ter carry de Word to de dyin'? Is all de sinful souls of men 'roun' hyah done be'n saved?"

Lazarus was silent; Brother Sims had announced the line of his forthcoming remarks.

The congregation were now doubly happy. Not only were their apprehensions stilled, but there was in the situation before them promise of large reward; for in singling out Lazarus the preacher had selected a most able opponent, and this being an experience meeting, Lazarus would have a chance.

Finally, the late-comers had all arrived, and the human drift that had hung against step and lintel floated in. The shuffling feet grew still. Then spoke the Rev. Joshua Sims, gently and pathetically.

"Dearly beloved," he said, exactly reproducing the full musical tones of a great Georgian he had once heard, "hit was my full mind to come tergedder wid yer dis mornin'; but de debble took Brother Si Evans ter Macon on

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yestiddy, an' de Messina Church money went wid 'im. An' de same ole enemy of mankind took 'im ter dwell en de tents of de wicked, tel, if it hadn' be'n for Cap'n Bofay an' de perleece, he wouldn't er had 'nuff er dat money lef' ter git outer de jug wid. Hit took me nigh onter all dis blessed day laborin' wid dat sinful soul ter fin' out dat Messina's new church is goin' ter stay er-growin' in de shape of live trees fer er few mo' years ter come. I ain't in no mind, dearly beloved, ter preach ter-night, an' I calls yer tergedder fer er ole-time 'spearence meetin'. Br'er Clay, lead us ter grace."

And Brother Clay led them. He prayed for unlimited blessings upon the lost world, his powerful voice rising to a climax of emotion for the absent, and lapsing almost to a whisper when he came back to those at hand. With an astute perception of impending difficulty, he interpolated very skilfully an able defense of the presiding elder, to whom he was much beholden. "An', O Lord," he said, "don't jedge er man too hard what's got er morgidge so big hit covers er mule, er sow, an'



er bull yearlin', tel yer wouldn' know dey was under dere ef de trough warn't empty all time."

"Oom hoo!" exclaimed Lazarus, encouragingly.

"Don't jedge er man too hard what's got fo' chillen too little ter work an' too big ter fill up three times 'twix' sun-up an' sun-down; 'sides one what's a widder wid two more babies, an' es wife's mother an' es own ter look atter!"

"Hyah 'im, Lord!" said Lazarus. "He knows!"

"Don't jedge er man too hard when he's lak dat, fer time has come wid him when hit's more pow'ful ter save bodies den ter save souls; fer ef de body perish, de soul hit will sho'ly git erway fum us all."

"Listen ter de good brother, dear Lord!"

"An' so, ef it comes ter de p'inted question, how many sheep lef' in de fold, look at dem he done save when de grass was short, an' don't let no man pester him 'bout fo' ole wethers what die. Gi' 'im time, an' er good



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price fer cotton dis fall, an' trus' 'im ter mek
up for los' bodies wid foun' souls."

"Amen!" said Lazarus, fervently, and a
fairly good echo supported him.

But Brother Sims was not to be thwarted.
He gave out the hymn:

Are there any of the old sheep lost to-night?

Are there any of the old sheep lost?

Are there any of the old sheep lost to-night?

Better ring them golden bells;

Ring them sweet golden bells;

Ring them sweet bells!

Ring them sweet golden bells,

And call the old sheep home!

A long and solemn silence followed the
singing of this hymn. The audience were ex-
pectant. After a glance at Brother Lazarus,
who seemed little disposed to lead off, the
preacher said:

"Dearly beloved, what have de Spirit done
for you?"

After a few moments, Chloe arose and gave
a dramatic recital of her "comin' through,"
which warmed up the assemblage to a spon-
taneous burst of song; and then little Tom

told of an angel meeting him in Swift Creek swamp, and how he "breshed" sin from him with a "gold-handle bresh." And Tempy had seen a man "comin' down the mountain, leavin' shinin' footprints," and bidding her keep in the straight and narrow path. Old Peter, with his low and musical voice, confessed that he had felt a hand in his, one night, leading him back, when he was "on de wrong road." And little Manse gave a recital of such marvelous inconsistency that no one raised a hymn when he finished; but his grandfather offered up a fervent prayer for liars and the new generation of "little niggers." Many had spoken, and the hours passed, when the critical moment arrived.

The Rev. Joshua Sims realized when too late that he was at a great disadvantage. Unless Lazarus should give in his experience first, he would have the closing; and Lazarus had a rampant, tropical fancy which, once set free, was an uncertain factor in any experience meeting. Besides this, Lazarus possessed a sense of humor, and, from long association



with Sims, had acquired a readiness that was not discreditable to his model; moreover, he knew his antagonist's record.

The preacher had waited patiently, with the hope that the other would speak first and sacrifice the advantage of position; but that worthy sat with his chin upon his hands, and his hands crossed over his stick, absorbed in thought. Occasionally he nodded his head, but whether as an endorsement of some sentiment expressed, or in acceptance of some thought that came to him, will never be known. Certain it is, however, that once his form shook with emotion, and a broad smile flashed upon the placid vacancy of his aged countenance; but people often laugh in church from emotion not allied to fun. Still, the preacher did not like that silent demonstration, and from time to time his eyes rested inquiringly upon the elder. When the last stretch of silence had remained unbroken until it was painful, he said in his friendliest tones:

"Brother Lazarus, can you shed any light on de darkness of dese po' souls ter-night?"



Lazarus looked sleepily upon him, and replied slowly :

"Hold de candle, Brother Sims, tel I look over Jordan. Mebbe I can find de troof dere!"

No man knew better than Joshua Sims the strength and weakness of the negro character. Never in his ministry did he show anger, never did he abuse. The negro fattens on scolding, and while excusing himself generally excuses his critic also. But ridicule is torture. Laughing faces and curious eyes turned upon him can come as near making the uneducated country negro a sick man as any combination under the sun. Sims usually crucified his victim with metaphor, a parable or story; and when, still seated in his broad, deep chair in front of the pulpit, he began his remarks, the silence of the room was as the silence of the gallows when the sheriff lays hand on the lever.

"Dearly beloved," he began, "one er de riches' white men what ever live in dis kentry was name' Dives. He was big rich, but not in



grace. He come of bad stock, 'cause es pa make es money 'fo' de war, tradin' niggers. After he done dead, es son, dis hyah same Dives I'm talkin' 'bout, tek es money an' trade mules, same as es pa trade niggers; an' fus' thing yer know, he done lay by er thousan' million dollars in de 'change bank yonner in Macon, an' don't ask nobody any odds, but des set esse'f down ter live. Now, dere was livin' on de Dives place er po' ole nigger name' Lazy. Dat warn't es rale name, dearly beloved; it was des er nickname. His name sho' 'nuff was Lazarus."

A ripple of excitement, followed by a distinct laugh from little Manse, drew a mild look of inquiry from the speaker; and the presiding elder withered the guilty party with a stare of such ferocity that the little fellow's jaw fell, and he slid along his bench precipitately, and finally sat upon the floor with a loud thump. When he had arisen, and the excitement had subsided, the preacher continued:

"Somehow, dey got fust ter callin' 'im Lazy--



urous, an' fum dat hit worked down ter Lazy. Hit was er name made for de man, an' hit fit 'im like er new back-ban' on er pasture-mule."

Again the preacher paused, and poured a look of mild rebuke over the audience; for several women were hunching one another and ducking their heads in silent laughter. Their mirth died out when they encountered the eyes of Brother Lazarus.

"Ol' Unc' Lazy knocked off work, one year, when es young Marse Dives comed out ter spen' de summer on es place, an' hung 'roun' de house. But law! he never knowed what hard times was tell he got ter settin' up wid dat white man; fer hard times an' Dives trabble tergedder, han' en han', an' when yer met one yer met de t'other. Unc' Lazy lef' ev'ything ter run hitse'f dat year; es cotton went ter grass, an' de lambs of de church got scattered en de hills an' swamp—for he was de presidin' elder—an' fo' of 'em died plum' dead!"

"Dar, now!" said Emanuel, involuntarily; and everybody laughed—everybody but Lazarus, who photographed upon his brain the

rash speaker's image. Joshua Sims wrinkled his forehead as one who is resolutely patient under annoyance, and waited until order was restored.

"Den, dearly beloved, Unc' Lazy knowed what hit was ter put es trus' en princes. He got so pow'ful weak an' po', he was hongry all time; an' he go an' set esse'f down by es Marse Dives while 'e was er-eatin'; an' when dey fetch in dat barbecue shote, what was des er-layin' on de dish, smilin' wid es eyes shet, an' weepin' brown gravy down enter er collar of sweet 'taters—"

"Hush, man, hush!" exclaimed an earnest voice somewhere; and Emanuel, reaching back, shook hands with Peter, amid subdued applause.

"—When he seed dat shote, an' de niggers rushin' en fum de kitchen wid hot biscuit, b'iled bacon, fried greens, an' big hominy an' cracklin' bread, an' de air of de room was full er misery, es heart fairly died, an' he groan, des so: 'Oh, Marse Dives, I so hongry!' An' dat white man sorter look down over es shoul-



der to whar po' ole Lazy was er-settin' on de flo', like he was greatly s'prised. 'Have er crum', 'e say, des so, 'have a crum'!' An' wid dat 'e bresh de table wid er backhanded lick, an' smile at de gal what was swingin' de peacock feathers, 'cause 'e knowed ole Lazy had ter scramble fer dat much wid de setter dog.

"An' den come mo' trouble; for dat white man des natchully mean ernuff ter drink six glasses of 'simmon beer right 'fo' es nigger's eyes, an' finish wid de jug. An' when po' ole Lazy say, 'Oh, Marse Dives, I so thirsty,' 'e say, 'Go down ter de spring branch, backer de house, nigger, an' git some water.' An' den he an' de nigger wid de fly-bresh laugh erg'in. You kin always 'pend on de fly-bresh nigger ter laugh.

"An' so hit went on all dat summer; an' po' ole Lazy git so thin, when 'e swaller er grape you could see whar hit stopped; but es Marse Dives he git fat tel de fall er de year come. Den, one day, es Marse Dives tek sick, an' de docters come, an' say one of es livers is out er gear; an' dey cut 'im open, an' tek er musca-



dine seed outer es vermyfuge pendulum, ter be in de fashion. Den, while dey was threadin' de needle ter sew 'im up erg'in, es little soul climbed outer hits nes' like a young jay-bird, an' hit kerplunk 'way down yonner en de lake er fire, 'fo' dey knowed it was gone."

"Amen!" said Peter, fervently, and then stirred uneasily, because the eyes of Lazarus sought him.

"Well," continued the preacher, "den Unc' Lazy fairly perish fum de face of de yarth, an' make only ha'f a load fer de angel what come down ter fetch 'im up; for dere warn't nuthin' seeyus charged erg'inst de ole man 'cep'in' es laziness, an' hit was borned en 'im. An' somep'n' had ter be done ter make Dives feel bad, outside er de burnin'. So de good angel sail off wid Unc' Lazy; an' when he got up to whar Peter had de gates cracked, Peter up an' say, 'I think,' sez 'e, des so, 'fum de way dat po' soul holds esse'f, hit mus' sho'ly be Unc' Lazy.' An' de angel say, 'Oom hoo!' Den Peter say, sorter puzzled-like, 'Who gwine tend 'im, chile?' An' de angel 'e don't

know. Den Peter stick es keys back en es belt, an' say, 'Dat nigger b'long ter de tribe er Ham, an' Aberham is 'sponsible for 'im. Go tek 'im ter de ole man, my son, an' tell 'im de cusses an' chickens sometimes come home ter roost tergedder.' An' de angel come ercross ole man Aberham settin' under er fig-bush, smokin' es pipe, an' he do like de angel tell 'im."

By this time Joshua Sims's audience had recovered from their spasm of solemnity, and were laughing as only plantation negroes can laugh. To add to the interest of the situation, Lazarus, under the mimicry of the preacher and his biting satire, had been settling in his seat until his head was below the level of their gaze. The curious, back of the first row, could only behold him by rising and peeping over the shoulders in front, and this they did whenever a new point was made, greatly adding to his distress. The preacher had not looked toward his victim, but his eyes brightened with the applause, and he rose to greater heights.



“Well, dearly beloved, Aberham, warn’t no man ter go back on es kin; an’ yet he was er little bit ’shamed fer folks ter see ’im. So ’e des open de bosom of es puffy shirt—one of dese hyah neggigent shirts de town boys wear out ter picnics—an’ ’e say ve’y kindly ter de angel, ‘Drap ’im en dere, my frien’; drap ’im en dere. I’ll tend ’im tel he rests up an’ gits es secon’ win’.’ An’ de angel drapped ’im, an’ Father Aberham comb es whiskers er little wid es lef’ han, an’ look ’roun’. An’ ain’t nobody know what done happen.

“But hit warn’t ve’y long, dearly beloved, ’fo’ Unc’ Lazy, who done gone right ter sleep, was waked up by hyahin’ er voice he knowed risin’ outer de depths like er man talkin’ fum er well, sayin’, ‘Oh, Father Aberham, I so hongry!’ An’ Father Aberham open es eye an’ say ter ole Lazy, ‘Elder, hyah dat?’ An’ ole Lazy say, ‘Oom hoo! I hyah ’im.’ Den sez Father Aberham, ‘Well, well! Why n’t yer talk back?’ Wid dat de shirt-front sorter stir er little, an’ ole man Lazy sing out, ‘Have er crum’.’ An’ Father Aberham laugh tel es

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whiskers trimble. But Dives come erg'in: 'Oh, Father Aberham, I so thirsty!' An' ole Lazy sing out erg'in, 'Go down ter de spring branch, back er de house, honey, an' try some water!' An' Father Aberham shake all over, an' say ter esse'f, 'Sho'ly dis is er merry dog!'

"But bimeby Dives give a mighty shout what wake up ev'ybody: 'Oh, Father Aberham, I do beseech yer, let Unc' Lazy come down hyah an' des so much as wet de end of my tongue wid one drap er water!' Well, dearly beloved, dat was somethin' else; dat was *work*, an' de los' of er fat job. Dat puffy shirt stirred pow'fully like er sack wid er pig in hit. De front flied open, an' out pops ole Lazy like a red-headed woodpecker fum er hole in er tree. He mek er horn outer es two han's, an' shout back in mighty anger: 'I'd see you in hell, firs'! Let de po' white trash burn!' ses he, curlin' up ergin in his warm nes'.' "

The laughter that followed this was prolonged many minutes, and was a tribute not only to the skill and power of the preacher,



but to Lazarus; for the ingenious turn given at the close made him a sort of hero, and the laugh was at his wit, not at him.

Gradually, under the realization of this fact, he assumed an upright position, and his courage returned. He arose gravely, and, crossing over, shook hands with the preacher, and resumed his seat. It was a happy demonstration.

"Look out, now!" said little Manse, "look out for Unc' Lazarus!" And this clearly voiced warning stilled the tumult and turned all eyes upon the elder. Perceiving his own danger, Joshua Sims gave out the doxology; but Lazarus waved his hand, and no one raised the tune. He sat in silent reverie until the strain upon the audience became almost painful; then he said, imitating Joshua Sims's voice perfectly:

"Dearly beloved, you have hyard fum Brother Sims. Now let er po' old man hold er candle for yo' wand'rin' feet erbout er minute!"

"Amen!" "Sho'ly!" "Yes, Lord!" Such



were the responses that came to him; and assured by these, he began in a low, earnest voice:

"I was er-settin' down yonner on de san'-bar t'other side de pond, las' week, studyin' how I could save souls, dearly beloved, an' gether my crop same time, when somep'n' happen dat 'stonish me. I look up, an' yonner come er man walkin' wid what look like er kivered umberella.' 'Fo' I done seed 'im good I say, 'Huh! da' 's Mister Ed'ards come back fum de salt water, an' he goin' ter qes-hum we alls now 'bout what dese hyah niggers be'n doin' while 'e gone'; an' I sorter brace myse'f ter tell 'im de troof, when I see hit warn't 'im, but fum de way he was gittin' 'bout under de limbs an' bushes, look like Major Crump, what sometimes comes er-fishin'. An' den I say, seein' 'im straighten up an' rear back as 'e walk, steppin' high: 'No, dat mus' be Marse Nat Winship!' Den I say, 'No, sho'ly, fum de way he hol' es head an' tote dat umberella, hit's de big Jedge, an' 'e out er-lookin' for moonshiners.' Wid dat I sorter

laugh, 'cause I knowed how col' de trail was 'round' dere. But hit warn't de jedge; hit was er strange man, dress ter kill, an' makin' esse'f free wid ev'ything like 'e done own hit. He come an' stood on de san'-bar, an' look erbout, sorter whistlin' easy ter esse'f, an' not botherin' 'bout me. Bimeby he strips de kiver off dat thing en es han', an' I see 't warn't no umberella, but look like one er dese hyah j'inted rods; an' in erbout two minutes he done screwed hit tergedder, put in er little wheel, run out er line, an' was tyin' on er hook. I look ter see what he goin' ter fish wid, but dere warn't no sign of er bait-gourd, an' I say, 'Dis hyah some newfangle' thing ter fool dem trout, an' Mister Ed'ards goin' ter hol' me 'sponsible.' Sez I, 'I'll des step up an' brace 'im one time, anyhow'; an' so I walk 'roun' 'im tel my shadder hit 'em en de eye, an' I say, ve'y perlite: ' 'Scuse me, boss, but I 'spec' you done bought dis place, ain't yer?'

"Wid dat he smile little bit, an' say, 'No, Unc' Lazarus; but I own most er de niggers.'

"Wid dat I natchully fell back, 'cause dat

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man know my name, an' es smile gi' me er chill on my back. When I git my breath, I walk 'roun' de t'other side, an' say erg'in, ' 'Scuse me, sah, 'scuse me; but dis hyah place is posted!'

"Wid dat, dearly beloved, he smile ter esse'f erg'in, as he fix on es hook, an' 'e say, 'Ah!'—des so—'ah! Well, dat's all right, ole man; I'm posted merse'f.'

"An' wid dat he sorter look back over es shoulder at me an' smile erg'in; an' 'fo' God, de col' chill an' de hot chill chase one ernudder up an' down my back tel I fa'rly staggered, puffec'ly pluralized wid 'stonishment. Fum dat time I couldn't do nothin' but stan' by an' hol' my jaw.

"Den dat white man start out ter fish. He tek er little red ribbin fum es hat, an' twis' hit 'roun' es hook, an' flung hit erway out yonner in de pond. Dearly beloved, I look down dere den, an' seem like ter me hit warn't water but air I see, hit was so clear. Look like de worl' was in de pond, an' I could see all sorts er souls swimmin' 'roun' er layin' up en



de shadder of de lily-pads. 'Mongst dat crowd I seen little Manse wid er mouf like er catfish, an' Aunt Chloe an' Manuel an' Peter an' Tatlin' Tilly, an' er heap more. An', dearly beloved, I seen down dere Brother Sims, layin' up erg'instant er log, wid er white skin drawed over es eye, payin' no 'tention ter de crowd swimmin' 'roun'. 'Spec' he was studyin' up dat 'sperience wid Dives an' ole Lazy."

As the rippling merriment of his hearers broke into a tumultuous laugh, Lazarus smiled grimly.

"Well, when dat hook wid de ribbin drap down in dat crowd, hit drap right front er Brother Sims's nose; but he didn't pear ter know hit was dere. Lots er dem po' souls started for it; but Chloe got dere fust, an' smiled hit right enter her mouf. An' de gemman gi' es pole er flip, an' nex' minute Chloe was flutt'rin' in de san' behind 'im. He des twis' de hook out 'er mouf, an' say, des so: 'Yer can allus ketch er country nigger like dat—wid er ribbin'."

A commotion in Chloe's neighborhood



showed where the shell had burst. Brother Sims arose with dignity.

"Brother Lazarus," he said slowly, "is yer makin' up er story on dis occasion, or is yer tellin' er 'sperience? 'Cause—"

"Tellin' er 'sperience, Brother Sims; same sort er 'sperience ole Unc' Lazy had. An' hit's too late now ter back down. Face de light, Brother Sims; face de light!"

Brother Sims resumed his seat, while those in the rear of the room crowded forward eagerly.

"An' den, dearly beloved, dat white man re'ch back in de bresh behind 'im an' find er little round cucumber, an' put hit on es hook, sayin', wi des eye on Brother Sims, 'I reck'n dis'll fetch 'im.' Hit warn't bigger'n er hick'ry nut, but soon as hit teched de water hit look like er forty-pound melon. Hit fell right in front er Brother Sims; an' all 'e do was ter let er bubble come right up fum es nose an' bus' on top er de water, like 'e was sayin', 'Yer can't fool me.' But Manse, little Manse, lyin' little Manse, des wiggle esse'f for'd an' open

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es big mouf. 'Fo' yer could bat yo' eyes, Manse was gapin' on de san', swearin' *he* didn't steal fum *no-body*."

At the mention of watermelons, Manse, who had recently had trouble in Lazarus's patch, glided through the crowd and out of the door. When his punishment arrived no eye could find him. He appeared afterward at the window, contributing a horse-laugh from time to time. Lazarus continued:

" 'I think,' said de gemman, 'I'd er fetched 'im but for dat big-mouf horny-head gittin' de bait. But yer goin' ter hyah fum 'im dis time.' An' wid dat 'e put on er little bottle er whisky what holds er sample, an' gi' hit er curl in de air; but when hit teched de water, Brother Sims he still ersleep; an' hit didn' mek no difference ef 'e was erwake, 'cause Brother Manuel come fum somewhar en de moss wid er rush, an' hit dat bottle so hard he run plum' ergroun'. De gemman kick 'im high up onter de san', an' say, 'Ef I'd knowed Manuel was down dere I'd er run 'im off wi' de pole, 'cause nobody can beat Manuel gittin' ter er bottle



er whisky.' But by dis time Brother Sims done waked up an' was swimmin' 'round' en er ring. De gemman didn't have nair 'nother bottle, so 'e had ter try er new bait. He des shek er bush, an' er young bird drapped down. 'Putty good chicken en de water!' 'e say, des so, an' 'e strung 'im on es hook. He drap dis right 'fo' Brother Sims's nose; but hit only made er little shiver run down es side-fins, an' 'e back off suspicious-like. Nobody can't fool Brother Sims when hit comes ter chicken. But hit fooled ole Peter. He landed en de san' wid de chicken en es mouf an' de legs stick'n' out through es gills.

"An' so hit went. Dat man des stan' up dere an' ketch mighty night de whole Holly Bluff crowd; an' hit made my heart ache, 'cause dere was *some* good folks dere. But Brother Sims still keep er-swimmin' 'roun' an' 'roun', an' lay low; an' den de gemman stop an' scratch es head er little; an' den he smile ter esse'f. He tek er little yaller mud, an' roll hit an' twis' hit tel hit look like er doll. He stick some white rocks en de mouf for teef, an'



two huckleberries for eyes, an' fum er bush whar black sheep be'n scratch esse'f he pull some wool an' stick hit en de doll's head. Den 'e tear up es red handk'chi'f; an' 'fo' yer could bat yer eye he done dress dat doll ter kill! I was er-lookin' at 'im wid my mouf wide open. Done dress dat doll ter kill! An' 'e snatch up er little dry grass, an' plat er hat; an' knock down er hummin'-bird, what come erlong, wid es pole, an' put 'im on de far side er de hat; an' des stretch out es han' an' say:

'Ki, yi! Kee, yee!

Butterfly, come ter me!

An' er big yaller butterfly come an' balance esse'f on es finger, pumpin' wid es wings; an' he sot 'er on de nigh side. All time 'e doin' dis 'e singin' sof' ter esse'f. Den he hol' out es han' wid de doll stan'in' en hit, an' 'e say, 'How is dat, ole man?' An' I say, 'Sho'ly you is er king en er circus!'

"Well, dearly beloved, 'e put dat doll on es hook, an' look at me. 'What yer bet dis time, ole man?' 'e say, des so. An' I say, 'Gi'

me yo' side de game, an' I bet er million! He laugh, an' gi' de bait er whirl, dearly beloved—"

"Brother Lazarus," said Joshua Sims, rising and drawing an old-fashioned silver watch from his fob with dignified formality, "'fo' yer fling dat line—I hates ter break inter yer 'sperience—but hit's er long way ter Smyrna, an' I better be goin'!"

"No, Brother Sims; yer can't start tel de moon comes up, an' hit ain't come up yit! He gi' de bait er whirl, dearly beloved—"

"Brother Lazarus, des er minute 'fo' yer fling dat line—"

"He gi' dat bait er whirl, dearly beloved, 'way over de water ter drap in de right place; but hit never drapped. Brother Sims made er rush an' met hit en de air. He broke water, an' landed erway up de bank, wid de bait an' hook an' fo' foot er line out er sight en es mouf. An' de noise 'e made was like de flop of er twenty-foot plank."

So great was the confusion at this point the voice of Lazarus was drowned out. Brother

Sims was down in the crowd, working toward the door, but purposely obstructed by the laughing members of his flock. Lazarus stood in a chair and shouted:

"An' den dat white man turn an' look at me wid one eye shet; an' es fine shoes an' clothes drapped off, an' es hoofs come out, an' es fishin'-pole turn ter er forked tail, an' I knowed 'im fer do Ole Man. Oh, Brother Sims! Face de light, brother; face de light!"

The crowd took up the shout. Brother Sims turned at the door, with a last effort at dignity.

"I knowed him den for de Ole Man," continued Lazarus, shouting above the din, "what made Dives call fer water. Face de light, Brother Sims!"

Brother Sims was shaking hands and getting out.

"De moon is er-risin', Brother Lazarus, an' hit's er long way down ter Smyrna."

The laughing crowd followed him out, and their voices filled the piney woods. As they separated toward the cabin lights far and

❧ BROTHER SIMS'S MISTAKE ❧

near, suddenly, away off in the shadows, the rich barytone of Manse came floating back, as clear as a bell:

Play on yo' harp, little David;
Hally-lu, hally-lul
Little David, play on yo' harp;
Hally-lul

This ringing chorus, always a challenge for the improvisors, was instantly caught up in every direction. As it died out there was a pause, and again Manse's voice was heard:

Debble he stan' on er nec' er lan',
An' he fish for de soul of er mortal man.

Once more the ready voices united:

Play on yo' harp, little David;
Hally-lu, hally-lul
Little David, play on yo' harp;
Hally-lul

And then little Manse settled a debt and made a name for himself; for to the silence that followed he gave these lines:

Debble got er fryin'-pan settin' on de burne?,
Lay low, Br'er Sims, when yer git down ter Smyrna!
Play on yo' harp, little David.

And long the laughing voices echoed in the pines.

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